

Beginner

The Use of Could (do) and could have (done)

RULES AND EXAMPLES

A: We use **could** in a number of ways. Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**:

Examples:

Listen. I **can** hear something. (*now*)

I listened . I **could** hear something. (*past*)

But **could** is not only used in this way. We also use **could** to talk about possible actions *now* or *in the future* (especially to make suggestions).

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B. We also use **could** (*not can*) for actions which are not realistic. For example:

I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*not I can sleep for a week*)

Compare **can** and **could**:

I **can stay** with Julia when I go to Paris. (*realistic*)

Maybe I **could stay** with Julia when I go to Paris. (*possible, but less sure*)

This is a wonderful place. I **could stay** here for ever. (*unrealistic*)

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C: We also use **could** (*not can*) to say that something is possible now or in the future.

The meaning is similar to **might** or **may**:

Examples:

The story **could be** true, but I don't think it is. (*not can be true*)

I don't know what time Liz is coming. She **could get** here at any time.

D: We use **could have** (done) to talk about the past. Compare:

1. I'm so tired, I **could sleep** for a week. (*now*)

I was so tired I **could have slept** for a week. (*past*)

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3. Dave was lucky. He **could have hurt** himself when he fell, but he's OK.

E. We use **couldn't** to say that something would not be possible now:

1. I **couldn't live** in a big city. I'd hate it. (= it wouldn't be possible for me)

2. Everything is fine right now. Things **couldn't be** better.

For the past we use **couldn't have** (done):

1. We had a really good holiday. It **couldn't have been** better.

2. The trip was cancelled last week. Paul **couldn't have gone** anyway because he was ill. (= it would not have been possible for him to go)